

Lena Brown

23 August 2007

Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Lena Brown was born March 28, 1914 in Waynesboro, Georgia. In the early 1930s her family arrived in St. Petersburg and settled in Methodist Town. At that time, Brown attended boarding school at Boggs Academy in Keysville, Georgia. She joined her family after the school year. After a few years in St. Petersburg working odd jobs, Brown returned to Boggs and graduated in 1936. Next, Brown attended Clark College in Atlanta. Her 12th grade English teacher recommended Clark College and arranged a work scholarship for Brown. She graduated with an English degree and a Business concentration.

After Clark, Brown taught first and eighth grade history for one year at Jefferson County Training School in Louisville, Georgia, "and both were out of my field," she laughed. The following year, she was hired as secretary at Gibbs High School in St. Petersburg. Brown recalled being the first black secretary in Pinellas County. She married Lou Brown in 1942.

When Brown's husband and other young male teachers at Gibbs were drafted during World War II, Brown became a part-time English teacher. She thought about eight or nine teachers were drafted. "We knew the responsibilities that they had taken had to be done by the ladies, the women, the wives," recalled Brown. Lou Brown, Jr. talked about his father's war letters being published in the Negro Pages of the St. Petersburg Times. Mrs. Brown coordinated the Negro Pages for about two years.

In the late 1940s, Mr. and Mrs. Brown earned graduate degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. Mrs. Brown earned a degree in Business Education and realized she preferred teaching to office work. Mr. Brown became certified in elementary and secondary education administration and became the first principal at Wildwood Elementary School. Mrs. Brown returned to Gibbs and created classes in bookkeeping and business math.

Years later, Brown became a guidance counselor and eventually coordinator of guidance. She recalled her experience working with students during integration. Students formed discussion groups and clubs that fostered interaction. Some parents in turn became more involved and understanding of each other, she said. "I think the children were called on to do more, and they did more to bring about a better relationship in some areas than the parents ... the children really were the ones that are to be given credit for the relationship that exist now among many."

Brown continued: "They (students) had to understand that I'm important, he's important, she's important in their own way, so we'll come together, we'll bring our talents together and at the same time we can keep our ethnic values, also. But we do not harm another person to get someplace."

In 1980, the Browns opened Lou Brown Realty. Lou Brown Jr., a broker who earned a degree in Howard University's real estate program, returned to St. Petersburg from Washington D.C. to start the business with his family. Lou Brown Jr. said there were other real estate groups, including other African American firms, in their community. But his family's presence in the area sparked their business

Lou Brown Jr. talked about his experience in real estate. He recalled selling properties in Midtown on 34th Street: "The city ... had been really desegregating and integrating in earnest since about '60 in terms of spreading even on the south side," he said. Brown Realty was selling property after the "fear" of integration, Mr. Brown said, when "realtors would run in and say 'oh they're coming, they're coming,' to scare the people to get them to list, and then they would turn around and sell the properties to the people who were coming in." Mr. Brown continued: "It took enough of that for people to realize okay well that guys moved in and wait a minute his kids are about the same age as mine, his interest his car, we both can't stand the way these Bucs are losing ... it started to become a community and in some areas it's really back to the community concept where the neighbor can scold the neighbor's kids and the neighbor will appreciate that regardless because he knows okay well this is a good man, it doesn't matter that we are of different ethnic backgrounds."

Mr. Brown talked about the transition in the immediate area surrounding Lou Brown Realty: "I would say 1960 it was probably 80 percent white and I would say in 1975 it was 95 percent black. And I would say it probably ... had more whites that were coming into the area."

Mr. Brown shared his observations about the influx of investment and new residents: "I have always found that it was never a 'oh you can't come in here' ... people would be accepted just as and that was the first surprise because everybody had been programmed to think other wise." He continued: "If there was any resentment or bitterness it was because it took so long for it to happen, it wasn't happening before but it's very difficult for that to translate to anything positive. It's important to know and to understand and to realize why there was no investment before ... if it had a racial basis to it than you need to understand that. But you can't wallow in it. You can't play the race card yourself and bring yourself down because, you know, that's of no benefit. It's good to know and it's good to understand from a standpoint of 'well, we need to make sure that ... it's not imposed on anyone like that again, but the best way to do that now is to uplift, and (say) 'Hey we're building a good product, you can buy it, you can sell it, you can come and enjoy it and be a part of the community.'